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Bioengineered Food Labeling Proposal

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Report Highlights:

The Director General of the Food Sanitation Bureau of the Department of Health presented an outline of new regulations covering both negative and positive labeling for bioengineered food products to the Legislative Yuan today, November 29.

Under the proposal, negative labeling will be established for Non-GM food products on a voluntary basis, but no definition of the characteristics of non-biotech food is yet available. Mandatory labeling will be established for all bioengineered food products, but implementation will take place over a 2 to 4 year period and occur in stages for specific products. He also supported use of a 5 percent tolerance level.

Includes PSD changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Taipei [TW1], TW

Bioengineered Food Labeling Proposal

In responding to public and, especially, legislative pressure, the Food Sanitation Bureau (FSB) of the Department of Health (DOH) plans to publish regulations covering both negative and positive labeling for bioengineered food products by the end of 2000. Today, November 29, the FSB Director General outlined the proposed regulations to the Legislative Yuan. The proposal is a result of a series of consultations with academics, industry, consumer groups, and the legislature. In part, it reflects the budgetary constraints on DOH, but also the strong belief by DOH in the safety of bioengineered foods which have been approved for commercialization in the United States and other countries with strong regulatory systems.

Negative labeling will be established for Non-GM food products on a voluntary basis, but no definition of the characteristics of Non-GM food is yet available. It is very likely that Taiwan will implement voluntary labeling in January 2001 on the same ad hoc basis for which organic labeling is currently implemented, based on certification by the supplier (Note: there are no specific organic labeling regulations on Taiwan.). Marketing Non-GM food products would be based on mutual trust between consumers and food suppliers and would be subject to intervention by the Fair Trade Commission, as well as FSB, if it did not meet as yet unspecified standards.

Positive labeling will be established for all bioengineered food products. There is one crucial change in the DOH mandatory labeling proposal from their previous announcement made on October 17 (see TW0045). Legislators have requested the DOH establish mandatory labeling for all Bioengineered food products, including those that are substantially equivalent. This was because the previous mandatory labeling system was considered by legislators to be difficult to communicate with consumers as it did not require labeling of substantially equivalent biotech foods.

Implementation of mandatory labeling will take place over a 2 to 4 year period, and occur in stages for specific food products.

After 2 years (January 2003) - raw corn, raw soybeans, soybean flour, corn flour, and corn grits.

After 3 years (January 2004) - tofu, soy milk, soy protein isolate.

After 4 years (January 2005) - all soy products, and multi-ingredient processed products.

DOH will use a 5 percent tolerance level unless the Legislative Yuan passes a law requiring a one percent tolerance level for bioengineered food labeling.

The FSB has convened interagency meetings to finalize a biotech food labeling proposal. In December, it has scheduled two interagency meetings every week, Monday and Wednesday, to expedite the process.

Scenario of Bioengineered Food Mandatory Labeling Inspections

According to the DOH, food manufacturers or suppliers will be responsible for testings in terms of their production quality control and assurance. The DOH is tending toward conducting factory on-site investigations to check raw materials and review testing results. Most local food manufacturers or suppliers are not capable of establishing a laboratory for testing bioengineered food products. Therefore, the DOH recognized laboratories of universities, research institutes, and private sectors would run bioengineered food testings on behalf of food manufacturers or suppliers, and or consumers. The DOH will likely use Good Laboratory Practices (GLP) as a

criteria to judge accuracy of testing results. The DOH's National Laboratories of Foods and Drugs (NLFD) is currently working on a GLP program proposal. Details of a bioengineered food inspection scheme are to be developed. The NLFD will be in charge of bioengineered food inspections. The NLFD is currently working on developing methodologies and experiences of bioengineered food testings.

Activities

There have been a number of public events and closed meetings on labeling bioengineered food products since the original October 17, 2000 DOH announcement. AIT/AGR and cooperators have participated as appropriate. Taiwan authorities are now discussing details of labeling implementation. The legal basis, inspection equipment and methods, labeling system in other countries, consumer education campaigns, and possible influences of biotech food labeling on trade, food safety, and development of local biotechnology are among the issues discussed in public events.

The National Laboratories for Food and Drug (NLFD) of the Department of Health has recently published Taiwan's first test results on "Detection of GM soybeans and Maize by the Polymerase Chain Reaction Method". In addition to the consensus of government agencies, industries, and academia, the primary factor determining priorities for commodities and products to be regulated by mandatory labeling is the inspection capabilities of the NLFD.

DOH/FSB officials will visit Japan in late November 2000, following an NLFD visit in July, to learn more about the Japanese experience on biotech food labeling and inspection techniques.

On November 21, the Agricultural and Cultural Affairs Offices of AIT/Taipei and U.S. Embassy Manila cooperated on a highly successful Digital Video Conference (DVC) on Bioengineered Food Labeling: A U.S. Perspective. Dr. Christine Lewis, Director of FDA's Nutritional Products, Labeling, and Dietary Supplements briefed a distinguished audience of 28 Taiwan regulators, academics, and representatives of the food industry on the U.S. regulatory environment concerning biotech food labeling and practical considerations involved in putting a labeling program in place. Following Dr. Lewis's prepared remarks, she and moderator Jonathan Gressel responded to questions on label content, consumer attitudes, consumer education, content standards/tolerances, food safety, and StarLink corn and split registrations. Dr. Lewis's comments and the upcoming FDA voluntary labeling guidelines should have a positive influence on the Taiwan labeling guidelines.

Prospects

With mandatory labeling in the offing and a distinct lack of knowledge among consumers, as evidenced by the Gallup poll results in the appendix to this report, informing the public concerning the food safety of biotech foods appears to be a priority for government and industry action.

A strong consumer education program on the food safety and environmental benefits of bioengineered food should allow continued marketing of U.S. bulk and processed foods, whether they are bioengineered or not. Taiwan regulators have reacted in a level-headed manner, so far, to the StarLink issue. Hopefully, a well-educated consumer will help to take the pressure off of the legislature and regulators.

Appendix

Taiwan - Consumer Attitudes towards Biotech Foods

In October, the Food Sanitation Bureau of the Department of Health (FSB/DOH) contracted the Gallup Organization to conduct a consumer survey on bioengineered food labeling. The consumer survey results derived from 1,083 valid interviews and are summarized by question as follows.

Q. Have you ever heard of GM foods?

A. 68% Yes; 30% No; and remaining 2% Don't know or didn't answer.

The following questions were based on 738 interviews of those who have heard of GM foods:

q. Good Points of GM Foods?

a. 54% Don't know or didn't answer; 20% No good to human; 11% Can increase production.

q. Bad points of GM Foods?

a. 67% Don't know or didn't answer; 22% Harmful to human health.

q. Do you know what are GM foods on the market?

a. 36% Don't Know or didn't answer; approximately 20% Know soy or soy foods are GM and 12% know corn is GM.

q. Will you purchase GM foods?

a. 43% Absolutely not; 15% Occasionally; 8% Often; 11% Absolutely yes; and the remaining 23% don't know or didn't answer.

Based on the total 1,083 valid interviews:

Q. Your concern of GM foods (majority answers of the concerns in the questionnaires)

A. 51% Agree that GM foods are artificially genetic modified products which could be harmful for human health; 50% Agree that GM foods have better appearance, flavor and are more suitable for human consumption than conventional foods; 62% Agree that they have concerns over GM food safety; 65% Agree that GM foods are products of modern technologies and that is a new trend; 65% Agree that application of biotechnologies could increase food production and benefit consumers.

Q. How serious is the problem that vegetarians eat vegetable foods containing animal genes?

A. 20% Very serious; 23% serious; 38% Not serious at all; 6% Not very; 13% don't know or didn't answer.

Q. Do you agree to production of GM foods?

A. 47% disagree; 40% agree; and 13% Don't know or didn't answer.

Q. Do you agree that GM foods shouldn't be produced because it is against nature?

A. 14% Strongly agree; 26% agree; 37% disagree; 10% strongly disagree; and 13% Don't know or didn't answer.

Q. Will you purchase Non-GM foods?

A. 22% Very Likely; 27% Likely; 30% Not likely; 6% Very unlikely; 15% Hard to say, don't know or didn't answer.

Reasons for those who (36% a total of 1,038 poll samples) will not purchase Non-Gm foods:

26% There is no difference between GM and Non-GM; 17% cannot differentiate GM and Non-GM; 10% brand loyalty no matter it is GM or Non-GM; 22% don't know or didn't answer.

Q. Acceptability of price differentiation of GM and Non-Gm foods.

A. 70% accept that Non-GM is 20% higher than GM;
55% accept that Non-GM is 50% higher than GM;
36% accept that Non-GM is two-fold of GM.

Q. Do you think that GM foods require to be labeled?

A. 18% Don't know or didn't answer; 82% agree to label GM foods, of which 74% choose mandatory labeling and 7% voluntary labeling.

Reasons for those who agree to have mandatory labeling for GM foods are: 47% It is convenient for consumers to identify GM foods; 45% Consumers have right to know what is GM; 15%. The mandatory labeling will get manufacturers' attention in focus of labeling.

Reasons for those who agree to have voluntary labeling for GM foods are: 15% Provide consumers choices to select foods they wanted; 14% because general public doesn't know what is GM food, therefore voluntary labeling will be enough; 13% think that voluntary labeling can provide manufacturers with condition to label their products truthfully; 26% no particular reasons.

Q. Do you agree positive labeling or negative labeling?

A. 63% Choose positive labeling; 11% negative labeling; 26% Don't know or didn't answer.

Reasons for those who agree with positive labeling for GM foods: 65% easy to identify GM foods; 25% manufacturers should notify consumers about GM products.

Reasons for those who agree with negative labeling: 47% to cut production costs; to avoid negative influence on GM foods.

Q. Your point view of labeling threshold?

A. 22% agree to set tolerance level and require labeling if food contains GM ingredients above the tolerance level; 52% agree with zero tolerance level, foods are required to label if they contain GM ingredients; 26% Don't know or didn't answer.

Q. What level is appropriate if there is a tolerance level for GM food labeling?

A. 56% Not sure; 22% agree to set tolerance level at 1%; 15% agree to set tolerance level at 5%

Conclusion of the Survey: The recent survey indicated that approximately 70 percent of Taiwan consumers

agreed to label GM foods and that GM foods are acceptable foods to majority of local consumers. The survey results also showed that local consumers don't know what the term Genetically Modified food really means. Therefore, consumer education has become an important issue for the Taiwan regulatory agencies and food manufacturers. On November 4, the FSB made Chinese language information on bioengineered food products available on the web at www.food.doh.gov.tw. The FSB will update the web site information frequently.